CCS Guidelines
to conducting a candidate survey

Adopted by the CCS steering committee
7 July 2020

Notes: These guidelines were elaborated based on the experiences of the CCS steering committee and the CCS team at FORS. They shall not be considered as compulsory rules, but instead as recommendations and best practices in conducting a candidate survey.
Most of the literature review and recommendations on web-surveys are based on the report: "Conducting a Candidate Study as a Web-Survey. Advantages, Challenges and Best Practices" (Andreadis & Kartsounidou, 2016).

I. Preparation of fieldwork

Team

For a successful process it is important to gather a project team, preferably with complementary skills and experiences related to data management, design and survey research in general. The project can also benefit from bringing in a partner that is well-known and respected among politicians and parties, in order to facilitate contacts with parties and politicians, and to market the survey.

Planning

Outline a working process, and a realistic timetable, well in advance. Decide when to go into the field and devote plenty of time to gathering contact information, translation of questionnaire (if applicable), proofreading, printing and mailing. The planning process should start several months before the fieldwork begins. The fieldwork should start as soon as possible after the elections (ideally within 6 months after the election). Sometimes insurmountable obstacles do not allow us to start the fieldwork immediately after elections; in such a case, contextualize the problem and ask guidance from the CCS steering committee or the CCS team at FORS.

If you plan to do face-to-face interviews in the Parliament, you are encouraged to first establish an agreement (not necessarily formal) with the Parliament and with each Parliamentary group (at least for the parties selected, in the case of Parliaments where there is a high level of party system fragmentation and if you select only some of them) in order to do the fieldwork. Use also personal contacts with MPs for a successful launch of the survey, especially in the case of Parliamentary groups that are more difficult to access. Inform the Parliament, the Parliamentary groups and the MPs themselves about the strict anonymity rules you will be using, and also that the results (with a report) will be made available to them upon request. In the presentation of the survey to the Parliament, to the Parliamentary groups and to the MPs themselves, do not forget to clearly explain the scientific rationale of the survey and its international scientific anchoring (i.e. its anchoring in international research networks).

Budget

It is important to have a realistic budget and to plan the process in line with the funds available. It is possible to run a candidate survey with limited funds if you are able to put in a lot of work yourself, and if you field a web survey. We do however recommend that you have a budget which allows you to hire assistants, and that you take into account costs for design, printing and distribution (postal costs) of materials, as well as data management.

Translation

The translation of the questionnaire is a very time consuming and delicate process. If available, use existing materials and translations as a point of reference for example previous versions of the candidate survey in your country or candidate surveys run in other countries in the same language (besides the English version, there are versions at least in French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish: please contact the steering committee or the relevant country teams for more information). Also crosscheck translations against (high quality) voter surveys using the same questions. Sometimes, it is difficult to provide an exact translation because of the different contexts. In such a case we ask you to consult our team at FORS to find the best solution and ensure comparability.

Defining the target population

The design of the survey begins with a definition of the target population and the selection of the sampling method. Census is usually avoided in surveys when the target population is big, since it can be an extremely expensive and time-consuming process and usually is impossible to reach everyone in the target population. However, the target population of candidate surveys is very specific and most of the time it is not very big. Therefore, instead of sampling, it is possible to conduct a census for the candidate survey, which means selecting everyone in the target population. CCS views that, ideally, the sample should consist of all candidates that ran for election, but countries have adopted different strategies based on what is feasible in their context. Another approach would be to try to reach only the candidates of parties with elected MPs. The latter solution might be a wise approach when you have a lot of candidates / parties. In cases when all candidates are not included in the sample, the survey report should contain a detailed description of the sampling method.

Contact information of candidates

Candidates can be contacted directly via e-mail or regular mail. The choice on which contact mode to use, depends on a variety of factors: access, budget and what is likely to work in your country context.

In many countries it is possible to get access to home addresses to all candidates via public authorities. If this is the case, you can send invitation letters and/or paper questionnaires via regular mail. Another potential alternative is to hire an assistant to collect email addresses, if they are not already made available via public authorities. In many cases, researchers can find the email addresses of candidates or MPs either by searching online (personal webpages, social media accounts etc.) or by asking the parties to provide them with this information.

Alternatively, the research team can ask parties to notify their candidates about the survey and let them know that if they want to participate in the survey, they should contact the research team directly. This alternative can be very useful because a) the notification may serve as an endorsement by the party leadership and b) it is more convenient for parties which do not feel comfortable with sharing the email addresses of their candidates.

Survey mode

The CCS does not specify a survey mode, and it is common to combine different modes, such as paper, online and even face-to-face interviews (generally with elected MPs). See variable T13 in the comparative dataset to have an idea about the used survey modes in different countries. Which mode to use depends on how you are able to contact candidates, your budget and cultural context, i.e. which mode that is likely to be the most efficient.

Mail and web surveys are less expensive in terms of fieldwork than face-to-face interviews, but as a drawback, it is more challenging to ensure high response rates and high quality of answers in web and mail surveys.

Design

a) Web surveys

In web surveys, the questionnaire design is a fundamental factor that can minimize measurement and nonresponse errors. One should keep in mind that the CCS common core questionnaire is created to be used as a self-administered printed questionnaire. As with other similar cross-national or cross-cultural surveys, if a national team plans to use a different mode, they should adopt the questionnaire accordingly. A proper adaptation of the questionnaire into a web environment is crucial as a particular format or question design can either motivate or discourage people to answer the question.

The CCS uses simple question formats such as yes/no questions, simple scales, and a few open-ended questions. A web questionnaire has many features and potentials: special question formats like visual analogue scales, multimedia and images, answer validation, progress indicator. However, we find that the website design can considerably affect nonresponse; hence, we recommend avoiding using any colors, bold letters or images in order to reduce measurement errors.

An important dilemma in web questionnaire designs concerns the presentation of questions: all questions in one page (scrolling) or one question per page (paging)? Scrolling is more suited for shorter and simple questionnaires while for longer and complex questionnaires a paging design is recommended. Mavletova and Couper (2014) argue that vertical scrolling leads to faster completion times and fewer technical problems. On the contrary, Wells, Bailey, and Link (2014) argue in favor of minimal vertical scrolling and support the idea of using one question per page. We should also keep in mind that many respondents may try to access the survey on their mobile devices. According to Andreadis (2015a, 2015b) if a web survey is optimized for smartphones (e.g. only one question per page) then both computer and smartphone users will give responses of almost the same quality. An additional benefit of the paging design is that in case of a drop-out the previous answers can be saved while in a scrolling design usually there is loss of data. Finally, sometimes a combination of the two designs is preferred, for instance when the questionnaire has multiple sections. In such a case, questions from the same section may be displayed on the same page.

b) Paper surveys

In paper surveys, such as in the case of the web survey, the design of distributed material should not be underestimated. A distinct and clear design in all materials that are used in the process is important. If you can afford it, use professionals to outline all distributed materials such as invitations, paper questionnaires and reminders. Use a consistent graphical design.

If you plan to use printed materials, arrange a tendering process among printing companies well in advance keeping in mind that such processes may take some time. Make sure that you have correctly planned the number of pages in your printed materials and the number of reminders that you are going to use. Also, investigate if the printing company can arrange the packing and distribution of materials that are to be posted.

A potential disadvantage of paper surveys over the web survey is that respondents not only have to spend time filling in the questionnaire, but they also have to make sure the researchers receive those questionnaires. Researchers should try to make the returning process as smooth for the respondent as possible. It is a good idea to include a pre-paid and addressed envelope in the package, so that the respondents simply have to mail it.

Increasing the response rate

(*all modes; for specifically on web surveys, see part 2c*)

Think carefully about procedures that are likely to motivate candidates to respond. Besides using the correct questionnaire design, there are a couple of different measures to take.

Professional impression: use university logos on distributed materials and team up with well-known collaborators such as researchers with a good reputation among politicians, or with public authorities (if possible).

Use a balanced number of well-timed reminders. If possible, use different modes (e-mail and regular mail).

Work through parties: If you can get parties to endorse the survey and to encourage candidates to respond, it can be very useful.

Market output: When distributing the survey, it might be beneficial to tell candidates about planned outputs, such as reports or books. Also, emphasize confidentiality, i.e. that it will not be possible to identify responses of individual candidates. Additionally, when sending invitations to respond, it is better to underline that the research is respectful of existing legislation about privacy and anonymity (e.g. GDPR in Europe).

The length of the questionnaire is an important element which influences the response rate of the survey. Long self-administered questionnaires may suffer from lower response rates, higher drop-outs, and lower quality responses. However, there are several ways of preventing excessive drop-outs, such as splitting the questionnaire into two shorter parts. Respondents of shorter questionnaires i) provide less non-substantive answers (“neither/nor”) to Likert-type scale items and ii) give longer answers to open-ended questions. We advise interested readers that they should consult, for example, Andreadis & Kartsounidou (2020) for more information.

II. During the fieldwork

The strategies to implement the fieldwork are dependent upon the adopted survey mode.
In some cases, but not all, a multimode survey is adopted: for example, face-to-face interviews for MPs and the successful candidates, and mail survey for the non-elected candidates.
Therefore, in the following we separate the instructions for the different types of surveys.

a) Face-to-face interviews

Face-to-face interviews are more expensive in terms of fieldwork but in many cases they ensure both higher response rates and the higher quality of answers.
To implement the fieldwork, you must first train the interviewers with the questionnaire and also introduce them to the topics uncovered by the survey. Ideally, you should use interviewers already familiar with survey methodology, namely people trained in social and political sciences’ empirical methods. Select also a supervisor for the fieldwork, ideally the research assistant in your research project.

If you plan to interview MP:s:
Inform the Parliament and the Parliamentary Groups about the start of the fieldwork.
Create a list of MPs to be interviewed, segmented by Parliamentary group, and allocate groups of them to the interviewers with the help of the fieldwork supervisor. Please add the photo of every MP so that each interviewer knows exactly who he/she should interview.
You may approach the MPs in the Parliament in several ways, depending on the type of agreement you have with the Parliament, the Parliamentary groups and the MPs themselves. In some cases, you (i.e. interviewer) need to book an appointment with the MP, while in other cases the interviewers are allowed to stay in the Parliament and to try and personally contact the MPs after the parliamentary session. In any case, the interviewers must always use proper identification, namely to document their relationship with the research project, and also be able to show the Parliament’s permission to do the fieldwork. You must prepare interviewers that several attempts might be needed to do one single interview and that persistence is a key factor for success.
Try to ensure a high response rate in general, but especially for the smaller Parliamentary groups (due to the need of sufficient population size that allow at least to apply some statistical procedures).

After the study is done, do not forget to return the results in a report to the Parliament, the Parliamentary Groups and the MPs.

b) Mail questionnaire

When you send the questionnaire to the candidates, please enclose a letter about the strict anonymity rules you will be using, and also indicate that the results (with a report) will be returned to them upon request after the survey. In the letter where you present the survey don't forget to clearly explain the scientific rationale of the survey and its international scientific anchoring. Moreover, if you interview the branch of elected candidates, MPs, through face-to-face interviews, and if you already have an agreement with the Parliament and the Parliamentary groups to do the field work in the National Assembly, please indicate that in the letter.
In a sufficiently large envelope with the letter mentioned in the previous point, please include also two other fundamental elements: the questionnaire printed in both sides of each page to reduce the number of pages and the costs with the survey; and a sufficiently large envelope, already stamped and with the proper address for the return, so that the candidate can return the questionnaire easily and without personal costs. Establish a reasonable deadline for the return of the questionnaires: around 15-30 days is recommended.

Create a list of candidates to be reached, segmented by party, with the help of the fieldwork supervisor. Then, don't forget to add a column in that list where you can insert information about whether the candidate was already interviewed or not. To do this you must give a different number to each questionnaire, and associate each number with the name of a candidate to be reached, so that in the end you can know exactly who has already answered and who has not done it yet.
Prepare to send an appropriate number of reminder letters to the candidates that did not return the questionnaires in due time. In the reminder letters, please include again the questionnaire printed in both sides of each page, and a sufficiently large envelope already stamped and including the proper address for the returns.

c) Web surveys

After taking all the important decisions for the preparation of the survey the next stage of the survey process is the implementation of the survey. The two main activities that take place in this stage are the recruiting of the respondents and the measurement.

The term recruiting refers to the contacting phase, where invitations are sent to all the units. Recruiting process in list-based web surveys is a process that takes place separately from sampling. There are different modes of contact (mail, email, phone) and a combination of modes is possible when all the contact information of the units are available for the researcher. However, the typical recruiting in list-based web surveys relies on email invitations. There are three types of invitation messages: the pre-notification, the main survey invitation and the reminders.

The pre-notification is sent before the main invitation to participate to the survey. In general, the pre-notification is optional; on the contrary, the main invitation is essential in order to participate in the survey. The main invitation can be sent either by mail or email depending on the available contact information from the sampling frame. Nevertheless, in both cases the main element that should be included in the main invitation of a web survey is the URL address of the web questionnaire. In email invitations, an automated login is preferred. A unique URL is prepared for each respondent, to which an ID code (token) is added at the end of the basic URL of the web questionnaire. The individualized URL link secures and guarantees that no third parson can have access to the questionnaire and that participants can answer to the questionnaire only once. Respondents can have access to the questionnaire just clicking on the individualized URL link. However, in the email invitation there should be explicit instructions and options for accessing the web questionnaire, in case the link is not working or in case the respondent is not very familiar with internet usage (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 287).

In addition, the main invitation should contain elements required by professional or ethical standards and elements to establish trust and increase the response rate. More specifically, it should provide information on how and why respondents were selected, how to find the survey on the web, additional contact info of the researcher and an option to opt-out. Another important element to highlight is the survey sponsor, who could be an authority, a researcher, a partner, a client or another organization or individual. Presenting the survey sponsor, especially when the latter is known or highly appreciated by the respondent, can increase legitimacy and trust, creating an impression that the survey is important and thereby affecting the intention to participate (Fang et al., 2009; Fang & Wen, 2012) and increasing the response rate (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003).

Other characteristics of the invitation that can increase the response rate are the length of the invitation text, where a long invitation text can increase the response rate and the position of the URL address at the bottom of the invitation (Kaplowitz et al., 2012). Keusch (2012) argues that apart from the pre-notification message also a female sender for contacting a mainly male sample can maximize the response rate. Petrovčič, Petrič and Manfreda (2016) observe that at least one of the following elements: elements of authority, plea for help, and sense of community in email invitations, can contribute to a higher response rate than not using any element.

Moreover, there is a considerable debate among scholars regarding the personalization of the invitations. On the one hand, it can establish trust and a better connection between researcher and respondent (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 272). In addition, personalization can also influence the response rate of a web survey (Cook et al., 2000; Edwards et al., 2009); although, other studies observed that personalization had no significant effect on the response rate (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003). Apart from the increase in the response rate, personalizing invitations can also motivate respondents to finish the questionnaire (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2012). On the other hand, personalization may also have a negative impact in terms of anonymity. Personalized should be avoided especially in surveys with sensitive questions, where phenomena of social desirability are more likely to be observed or item nonresponse ("I prefer not to answer") (Joinson et al., 2007).

The measurement is the main data collection process which is related to the actual filling of the questionnaire. At this stage the only way for the researcher to interact with the respondents is indirectly through the design of the web questionnaire, which is fixed in content and format (Callegaro et al., 2015, p. 167). Therefore, a successful measurement process depends considerably on the quality of the questionnaire preparation and the recruiting. Since fundamental changes are not possible to be done, the researcher before activating the survey should be sure that everything is working and no more changes are necessary. These can be confirmed by pre-testing both from a technical and a methodological perspective.

III. After the fieldwork

The translation of the dataset

For a successful integration of datasets, it is crucial to use the same variable names as in the core questionnaire.

Most of the time, country datasets are created using the country's language. Therefore, variable labels and values have to be translated to English. For this, one can use datasets formerly published by CCS as data mask. If needed, contact the CCS team at FORS for advice with creating code scripts for labels.

Data cleaning

Variable encoding: Country teams should be careful when defining variables formats. This is especially important if one imports the dataset as an Excel file into other statistical software. CCS mostly works with numeric variables, but sometimes string formats are used.

All datasets should be cleaned before submitting to FORS.

Specifically for web surveys:

The data editing and cleaning is a crucial process in order to verify the quality of the data collected (Groves et al., 2009). During this process the researcher inspects and alters the data in order to remove non-useful cases: multiple responses by the same individual (especially in non-list based samples), lurkers submitting empty questionnaires and partially completed questionnaires as long as the responses to key questions are missing. Moreover, some post-survey validations are important in order to find potentially invalid data such as non-differentiation (aka straight-lining), non-substantive answers and responders with very short item response times. For instance, using web survey paradata we can flag as speeders, the respondents who spend on the items less time than the necessary to comprehend the question (Andreadis, 2012, 2014). Other post survey adjustments are the coding of open ended questions and imputations where it is possible for missing values. However, a candidate survey dataset does not suffer from similar problems, because the candidates do not display the aforementioned response patterns and they give high quality responses. The only cleaning action needed on a candidate survey dataset, is the removal of the incomplete questionnaires due to drop-outs.

Weighting

Weighting techniques intend to balance the differences in the structure of respondents due to nonresponse and coverage errors, in order for the sample to be representative of the target or general population. One method of weighting a candidate dataset intends to guarantee that each party is equally represented (that is to say the weighted sample includes the same number of candidates from each party in the study). This approach is the most appropriate, when each party has the same number of candidates. On the other hand, there are cases (e.g. when we want to compare candidates with voters) where we can use weights that reflect the vote share of the parties in the study (Teperoglou et al., 2014).

Anonymization

The main purpose of the CCS common core questionnaire is the ability to run comparative analyses including as many countries as possible. CCS offers the infrastructure and the human resources in order to collect, harmonize, produce a common dataset and disseminate it to the research community. In addition, the issues of ethical or legal restrictions (such as anonymity of the respondent) are not as crucial with candidates as they are with voters. Although the combination of some variables can reveal the identity of the respondent (e.g. a combination of electoral district, party and year of birth) the fact that the candidate MPs are public figures who have already expressed their opinions and positions openly, minimizes the need for full anonymity. However, in the end it is the responsibility of the country teams to ensure that their candidate data complies with the national data protection and privacy laws before submitting their data for integration into the comparative CCS dataset.

CCS data at FORS will be processed in compliance with GDPR as well as other relevant national and international data protection rules. This means e.g. that CCS data shall be used for scientific research only, and that every user has to sign a user contract before accessing the data. However, in the end it is the responsibility of the country teams to ensure that their candidate data complies with more restrictive national data protection and privacy rules before submitting their data for integration into the comparative CCS dataset (e.g. in the case of a very small and specific sample). If there are any specific variables that are « problematic » in view of anonymity, we ask country teams to deliver to FORS the dataset without these problematic variables, to document the reasons for doing so, and to minimize the loss of information to what is strictly necessary.

Documentation
CCS provides a common questionnaire to collect the technical details of the fieldwork, and record basic institutional and political information (see documentation attached to the comparative dataset – Survey description, Macro report)
In addition to the above, country teams are asked to document if they deviated from the scales and definitions set in the core questionnaire and to send these changes to FORS in a study note. This often happens to ensure comparability with the results of previous country studies. This practice, of course, causes compatibility issues with the CCS comparative dataset. To solve this issue, country teams are asked to re-scale the variables in question to its original form, and to include both versions into the dataset.
Country teams also need to sign a data deposit agreement with FORS.

Statement on representativeness
Country teams are asked to fill in the metadata-table (template provided by FORS) in which they provide data on the representativeness of the dataset.

References

Andreadis, I. (2012). To clean or not to clean? Improving the quality of VAA data. *XXII World Congress of Political Science (IPSA)*.

Andreadis, I. (2014). Data Quality and Data Cleaning. In D. Garzia & S. Marschall (Eds.), *Matching Voters with Parties and Candidates. Voting Advice Applications in Comparative Perspective* (pp. 79–91). ECPR Press.

Andreadis, I. (2015a). Comparison of Response Times between Desktop and Smartphone Users. In D. Toninelli, R. Pinter, & P. de Pedraza (Eds.), *Mobile Research Methods: Opportunities and challenges of mobile research methodologies* (pp. 63–79). Ubiquity Press. https://doi.org/10.5334/bar.e

Andreadis, I. (2015b). Web surveys optimized for smartphones: Are there differences between computer and smartphone users? *Methods, Data, Analysis*, *9*(2), 213–228. https://doi.org/10.12758/mda.2015.012

Andreadis, I., & Kartsounidou, E. (2020). The Impact of Splitting a Long Online Questionnaire on Data Quality. *Survey Research Methods*, *14*(1), 31–42. https://doi.org/10.18148/SRM/2020.V14I1.7294

Andreadis, I., & Kartsounidou, E. (2016). Conducting a Candidate Study as a Web-Survey. Advantages, Challenges and Best Practices. *1st BCES International Scientific Conference*, *July*, 1–2.

Callegaro, M., Lozar Manfreda, K., & Vehovar, V. (2015). *Web survey methodology*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Cook, C., Heath, F., & Thompson, R. L. (2000). A Meta-Analysis of Response Rates in Web- or Internet-Based Surveys. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *60*(6), 821–836. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131640021970934

Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., & Christian, L. M. (2009). *Internet, mail, and mixed-mode surveys : the tailored design method.* (3rd editio). Wiley & Sons.

Edwards, P. J., Roberts, I., Clarke, M. J., DiGuiseppi, C., Wentz, R., Kwan, I., Cooper, R., Felix, L. M., & Pratap, S. (2009). Methods to increase response to postal and electronic questionnaires. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, *3*. https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.MR000008.pub4

Fang, J., Shao, P., & Lan, G. (2009). Effects of innovativeness and trust on web survey participation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *25*(1), 144–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2008.08.002

Fang, J., & Wen, C. (2012). Predicting potential respondents' decision to participate in web surveys. *International Journal of Services Technology and Management*, *18*(1/2), 16. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSTM.2012.049013

Groves, R. M., Fowler, F. J., Couper, M. P., Lepkowski, J. M., Singer, E., & Tourangeau, R. (2009). *Survey methodology* (2nd Editio). Wiley.

Joinson, A. N., Woodley, A., & Reips, U. D. (2007). Personalization, authentication and self-disclosure in self-administered Internet surveys. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *23*(1), 275–285. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2004.10.012

Kaplowitz, M. D., Lupi, F., Couper, M. P., & Thorp, L. (2012). The Effect of Invitation Design on Web Survey Response Rates. *Social Science Computer Review*, *30*(3), 339–349. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439311419084

Keusch, F. (2012). How to Increase Response Rates in List-Based Web Survey Samples. *Social Science Computer Review*, *30*(3), 380–388. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439311409709

Mavletova, A., & Couper, M. P. (2014). Mobile Web Survey Design: Scrolling versus Paging, SMS versus E-mail Invitations. *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology*, *2*(4), 498–518. https://doi.org/10.1093/jssam/smu015

Petrovčič, A., Petrič, G., & Lozar Manfreda, K. (2016). The effect of email invitation elements on response rate in a web survey within an online community. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *56*, 320–329. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.11.025

Porter, S., & Whitcomb, M. (2003). The impact of contact type on web survey response rates. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *67*(4), 579–588. https://doi.org/10.1086/378964

Sánchez-Fernández, J., Muñoz-Leiva, F., & Montoro-Ríos, F. J. (2012). Improving retention rate and response quality in Web-based surveys. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *28*(2), 507–514. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.10.023

Teperoglou, E., Freire, A., Andreadis, I., & Leite Viegas, J. M. J. M. (2014). Elites' and Voters' Attitudes towards Austerity Policies and their Consequences in Greece and Portugal. *South European Society and Politics*, *19*(4), 457–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2014.983306

Wells, T., Bailey, J. T., & Link, M. W. (2014). Comparison of Smartphone and Online Computer Survey Administration. *Social Science Computer Review*, *32*(2), 238–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439313505829